

MDDI-IPS FORUM

FOSTERING CHILD-SAFE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Panel 2: How Can We Foster Child-Safe Digital Environments on Social Media?

By Linda Tay

Background

Following the first panel of the Forum that presented various perspectives on bans in managing harms on social media, the second panel sought to explore means of fostering child-safe digital environments on social media, informed by research and practice.

This panel, titled “How Can We Foster Child-Safe Digital Environments on Social Media”, featured Dr Natalie Pang, Associate Professor and Head, Department of Communications and New Media, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore; Mr James Tan, Chief Executive Officer at Touch Community Services; Mr Edward Wee, Director, Online Communications Office, Strategic Policy & Operations Cluster at the Infocomm Media Development Authority; and Mr Brent Carey, Chief Executive Officer of Netsafe, New Zealand. The session was moderated by Dr Carol Soon, Associate Professor (Practice) and Deputy

Panel 2: How Can We Foster Child-Safe Digital Environments on Social Media?

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Caption for photo: (From left to right) Mr Brent Carey, Mr Edward Wee, Mr James Tan, Dr Natalie Pang and Dr Carol Soon, speakers and moderator for Panel 2 of the MDDI-IPS Forum.

Fostering Child-Safe Digital Environments on Social Media

The first speaker was Dr Natalie Pang, who shared findings and insights from studies done on social media and children aged 17 years and younger. With studies showing high prevalence of social media exposure among this demographic, she made a distinction between access and ownership: while platforms could implement access restrictions based on age, in practice children still have access to social media even without devices. This is largely attributable to caregivers and parents who might be cognisant of the risks of social media exposure but hold differing attitudes when it comes to the same issue for their own children. In addition, she highlighted that children's experiences on particular platforms may not be homogeneous, and those who chose not to report harmful content that they experienced could be influenced by past experiences or consider such content as the norm.

Dr Pang's final remarks drew on the study findings. First, she pointed out a confidence gap where the ability to identify online falsehoods is usually lower than the reported confidence to do so. In addition, what children understand as "normal" can affect the type of online content

they choose to report. Finally, there is a need to consider the non-homogeneity of children's online experiences when thinking about social media exposure.

Safer Online Spaces, Safer Social Media

Mr James Tan stated that thinking about what a "safe digital environment" for a child entailed not only content moderation but also, more critically, the conditions around the child. Emphasising that "a child-safe social media should not depend on children protecting themselves from systems designed by adults," he described TOUCH's approach of having strong safeguards that evolve with age, growing child agency supported by adults, and making help available when harm occurs.

He also shared four stages in supporting a child's digital journey. The first stage involves early protection measures such as empowering parents with resources and toolkits to assist with conversations with their children. The next stage sees the organisation working with platforms to help youths be able to report harms, while the following stage involves building agency and regulation. Finally, DigitallyUs, an initiative to be launched in late August, aims to bring together digital safety, mental wellness, family and community support through education, intervention, and post-recovery online support. Mr Tan ended his presentation by recommending having age-appropriate safeguards, equipping children to know who to turn to in times of need, and treating recovery as a critical part of online safety.

Singapore's Approach to Online Safety

Mr Edward Wee started his presentation by giving an overview of Singapore's approach to online safety and the three regulatory levers: industry regulation, dealing with criminal harms and remedies for individuals. Focusing on the third limb, he shared about the recently launched Online Safety Commission (OSC). IMDA's findings had shown that user reporting to social media services for harmful content found on their own platforms had not been effective. Hence, the OSC was launched to provide victims of online harms in Singapore a dedicated and easily accessible avenue to seek timely redress. The OSC empowers victims to report harmful content and can direct platforms to remove such content as well as disclose user information to allow for the identification of perpetrators of online harm. Mr Wee also highlighted, under the first limb on industry regulation, the Code of Practice for Online Safety, which seeks to enhance user safety, empower users through user reporting and resolution, and ensure accountability in the form of annual online safety reports to be submitted by the designated social media services.

Next, he briefly shared the findings from IMDA's Online Safety Assessment Reports in 2024 and 2025, showing that children continued to have access to age-inappropriate content on some platforms. In response, MDDI has proposed four aspects of looking at the issue of children and their social media experiences: access, content, interactions, and features. Mr Wee ended his presentation by outlining what a child-safe digital environment would entail: age-appropriate restrictions on access, safeguards for content, restrictions on unsolicited messages, and moderation of features that exacerbate excessive use.

Shared Responsibility, Stronger Together

The last speaker, Mr Brent Carey, shared three takeaways from New Zealand's approach. First, online harm is not isolated to the online sphere but is often linked to real-world problems such as social exclusion. Second, prevention only works if people trust who they are reporting the matter to, and recognising that proposing solutions regarding age verification should be a considered endeavour, he encouraged Singapore to "take [her] time" with this. Finally, a whole-of-society approach is needed for a healthy society — and in turn, healthy online environments. He noted that the approaches adopted by different countries would naturally be different, depending on each country's systems and cultures. He also invited the audience to Netsafety Week, which would take place in August, and urged the inclusion of AI in conversations about social media. Finally, citing a survey which found that people who drew information from a wide range of sources — such as different platforms — reported better social outcomes, he reasoned that diverse media diets can be protective.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q: How can children be shielded from social media addiction, while also touching on the regulatory paradox, the erosion of truth, and other harmful effects involved?

A: Dr Pang replied that in tackling social media addiction, it is necessary to consider the broader ecosystem that children are in, and the process begins with the child's parents and peers. She also highlighted that giving very young children access to devices and allowing them to set up social media accounts can inculcate habits that in turn impact their socialisation and language use. Mr Tan added that building trust is critical, which TOUCH Community Services has been trying to help parents do by building resources to help them engage their children offline.

Q: Given today's focus on prevention, what evidence-based interventions — beyond digital literacy — can help rehabilitate youths who misuse AI, create deepfakes or engage in harmful online behaviour without grasping the consequences, so as to build accountability, foster understanding and reduce reoffending? What barriers are currently standing in the way of achieving these outcomes?

A: Mr Wee replied that IMDA had been working with MOE to simplify the complex safety and protection guides on social media platforms and make them more easily understandable for parents. He emphasised a need for efforts not only to implement parental control features and protections, but also to ensure they are simple and easy for both parents **and** teenagers to take ownership of their own social media use. Mr Carey agreed and reiterated the importance of having healthy conversations between older and younger people. Mr Tan added that it would also be important to include children and young people in the design of systems and platforms, recognising their digital fluency and potential for shaping the future. Dr Pang highlighted that many platforms remove inhibitors, which in turn results in a greater tendency for people to disclose personal information or post harmful content. Removing such content is

not straightforward because such content may have a blend of both wholesome and harmful elements.

Q: On 16 July, Meta announced a new feature to notify parents if Meta AI detects signs that a teenager may be at risk of suicide or self-harm during a conversation. Given that AI chatbots have, in some cases, reportedly encouraged such harmful behaviour instead, how can we ensure these safety features actually work as intended?

A: Mr Carey shared an anecdote of a failed chatbot that was set up at Netsafe to encourage people to ask questions, and noted that it was important to talk about these failures too. He felt that there was still a long way to go as efforts to study these features were hampered by guardrails put up by platforms. Mr Wee added that AI safety required studying at two levels: at the LLM level to develop safety guidelines for LLM use, and at the content level, to ensure maintenance of standards and prevent harmful content generation.

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